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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: ARAB RESIDENTS OF EAST JERUSALEM'S AL-BUSTAN  
SKEPTICAL OF ISRAELI MUNICIPALITY RE-DEVELOPMENT PLAN

REF: A. JERUSALEM 296  
[1](#)B. JERUSALEM 231

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein  
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) In recent conversations, Arab residents of the East Jerusalem neighborhood of al-Bustan, and the lawyers and city planners they have retained to represent them, expressed strong opposition to Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat's proposal that al-Bustan (immediately south-east of al-Aqsa Mosque) be re-developed into a tourist park and luxury residential-commercial complex. Residents and their representatives argue that the municipality's plans, which call for the demolition of approximately 20 percent of the neighborhood's 99 homes, offer no realistic prospects for al-Bustan's residents slated for eviction to find new housing in the area.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary and comment, continued: Several local residents speculated that the municipality's plan for al-Bustan is aimed not at improving living conditions in this low-income neighborhood, but rather at expanding the neighboring City of David archaeological park and tourist center, which is operated by the pro-settlement Elad organization. Given existing tensions in the area over Elad's archaeological activities, as well as the neighborhood's sensitive location in the "Holy Basin," just south of the al-Aqsa mosque, displacement of Arab families without their consent is almost certain to prove highly controversial, and perhaps incendiary. End Summary and Comment.

UPDATED RE-DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR AL-BUSTAN  
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[1](#)3. (C) On February 17, Mayor Barkat updated the Consul General on the Jerusalem municipality's plans for the re-development of al-Bustan, a small neighborhood of approximately 1,000 Arab residents located immediately southeast of the al-Aqsa mosque (Ref A). The current plan is the latest in a series of proposals dating back to 1995 for the re-development of part or all of al-Bustan into a tourist park. The municipality's latest proposal involves demolishing approximately 20 percent of al-Bustan's residences to make way for a waterside promenade and tourist facilities. The remaining structures in al-Bustan would be renovated into luxury residential and commercial units of up to four stories in height.

#### LOCAL RESIDENTS EXPRESS CONCERN, DOUBT

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14. (C) In conversations with Post, local residents of al-Bustan, community activists, the neighborhood's legal counsel (retained by residents), and senior Palestinian officials voiced strong concerns about the Mayor's proposal. Community organizer Fakhri Abu Diab told Israeli daily The Jerusalem Post that in the wake of recent press reports that the municipality intended to press ahead with demolition of homes in the neighborhood, al-Bustan's residents were "living in fear."

15. (C) In conversations with Post, residents of al-Bustan dismissed municipal suggestions that those whose homes were slated for demolition could move into new apartment blocks in the eastern half of the neighborhood, noting that no financial provisions had been made for their relocation into the luxury apartments that would replace the neighborhood's existing structures. Activist Morad Shafa told local reporters, "people want to stay in the homes they're living in now. They don't want to move, and they don't want to live on top of one another."

#### PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS: PLAN IS "EXTREMELY DANGEROUS"

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16. (C) Former Palestinian Authority (PA) Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Hatem Abdel Qader, citing press reports that demolitions would begin in al-Bustan imminently, accused the Mayor of "backing down" from his pledge to come to a mutually-acceptable agreement with the residents. Abdel

Qader called the situation "extremely dangerous" arguing, "this proves that Israel intends to displace Jerusalem's Arab residents." Abdel Qader said that al-Bustan's residents had no option but to push ahead with alternative zoning plans on their own, and attempt to seek a legal stay on any demolitions in the neighborhood. Note: In 2005, the residents of al-Bustan submitted a planning scheme that would have retroactively legalized most construction in the neighborhood. In February 2009, municipal officials formally rejected the plan. A revised version, submitted some months later, has not received municipal approval. End Note.

#### TWENTY NEW DEMOLITION ORDERS IN 2010

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17. (C) According to Ziad Kavar, an attorney retained by al-Bustan's residents, the municipality has issued approximately 20 new demolition orders for homes in al-Bustan since the start of 2010, in addition to 44 pending orders. Local residents and NGO activists expressed concern over press speculation that Barkat will move ahead with the demolition of Arab homes in East Jerusalem in order to "balance" the evacuation of Beit Yehonatan, an illegally-built apartment block in the Arab-majority neighborhood of Silwan occupied by an Israeli ultra-nationalist organization and named in honor of convicted spy Jonathan Pollard (Ref B). Barkat, they note, is currently under political pressure to implement a court order for Beit Yehonatan's evacuation.

#### FEAR OF CITY OF DAVID'S EXPANSION

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18. (SBU) Many al-Bustan residents and activists said their doubts about Barkat's plan are based not only on fear for their homes, but also on their belief that the municipality's ultimate intent is to expand the City of David archeological park, operated by the Israeli pro-settlement organization Elad, into al-Bustan, and beyond. Since its founding in 1986, Elad has introduced 250-400 Israeli residents and a six-acre visitor center into the neighboring Arab area of Wadi Hilweh, immediately to the west.

19. (SBU) Al-Bustan residents and anti-settlement NGOs,

including Ir Amim, note that many Arab residents of Wadi Hilweh live today inside a "tourist park" monitored by 53 cameras transmitting to a central control room operated by the private Elad organization, and guarded by private security contractors (which are funded by the Israeli Ministry of Construction and Housing). Elad representatives informed DepPolChief on a recent visit that some Arab residents must now obtain Elad-issued identification cards to pass through City of David turnstiles in order to reach their homes without paying the visitor's fee.

#### SINKHOLES, STRUCTURAL DAMAGE RAISE HACKLES

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¶10. (SBU) The attitude of Wadi Hilweh's and al-Bustan's Arab residents towards the City of David and Elad has also been colored in recent years by a series of street collapses, and reports of damage to the foundations of local homes, which residents blame on Elad's archaeological tunneling. Recently, on January 2 and 18, large sinkholes opened in the streets of Wadi Hilweh, one of which temporarily swallowed the front third of a city bus. Residents highlighted a YouTube posting of a video that shows Elad founder David Beeri discussing an incident in which Elad "tricked" the Israeli courts and Israeli Archaeological Association into overlooking dangerous digging into a Wadi Hilweh hillside that supports several Arab homes. In the course of the tape, Beeri is heard to say of the Arab houses, laughing, "Everything's standing in the air!"

#### COMMENT

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¶11. (SBU) The proximity of the al-Bustan neighborhood to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex and the al-Aqsa mosque, the potential political implications of displacing low-income Arab families from their homes, and existing tensions over Elad's activities all suggest that any decision by the municipality to move forward on plans to re-develop the neighborhood without the concurrence of al-Bustan's residents will prove highly controversial. End Comment.

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